DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 085 757 CS 200 947

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TITLE Perhaps the Professor Should Cut Class.
PUB DATE Nov 71
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (61st, Las Vegas, Nov. 24-27, 1971) originally titled "Get Back on That Log"

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); *Evaluation; Evaluation Techniques; *Individual Instruction; Student Attitudes; *Student Teacher Relationship; *Teaching Methods; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A basic college composition course without class meetings in which the instructors responded individually to each student's writing is described. The content of the course was each student's writing and the teaching method was the student writing and the teacher reacting in conference. Each student received a question-and-answer sheet, a brief style guide, and a "writer's checklist." The students were asked to write a paper once a week and confer with the instructor at least once a week. It was felt that the students in this way began to understand that the content was more important than the form and that what they said determined how they said it. It was also felt that the students gained more confidence in their writing abilities. The instructors felt the conference method compressed the time and energy usually consumed for classroom instruction; that the conference method provided good individualization of instruction and provided an invironment in which the students competed against themselves and not against others. Above all, it was felt that the conference method of teaching composition produced better student writers. (HOD)

ED 085757

PV 18

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, Las Vegas, Nevada, November 26, 1971.

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Perhaps the Professor Should Cut Class

by Lester A. Fisher and Donald M. Murray

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The experiment was born as we leaned against the doorframes of each other's office, gossiping, grousing, and chatting about our teaching.

"How do you teach basic composition when you've got a class with one Indian, two Indian Indians, three jocks, four forestry majors, three black sisters, three sorority sisters, and a dozen other students whose verbal scores range from 615 to 403?"

"Yeah, and the computer print-out shows students want in

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and we've got space for 80 in four sections."

"And the administration wants us to 'process' more students. Process, yet."

Our conversations continued over coffee in the faculty lounge.

"How'd class go?"

"Great. I learned a lot, and I think some of my students were entertained. You know, sometimes I think the better I get the more I become a professional ham, the less they learn. They sit and enjoy the show."

"And my workshop sessions aren't much better. Read this paper, it's really got something, and not one of my chowderheads saw it. They spent twenty-five minutes chopping at it for the wrong reasons. I never got the class back on track."

We continued to chat before department meetings and over lunch.

"Dammit, there just isn't any content in a writing course. I just taught a brilliant class, and everything I said was right. But if half of them follow what I said at the stage they're at in their development their writing will get worse."

"I know, I know. You have to get Susie to develop her ideas and Ralph to chop his prose down. How can you run a class that goes in at least two directions at the same time?"

"I can't. And when I have a really good class I have a terrible feeling a third of my students already know what I'm trying to teach them, a third can't possibly understand what I'm saying yet or at least see how it applies to them, and a third just may be with me. And that's when I'm really on."

"If we didn't have to teach classes...."

"Maybe we could teach individuals."

"Say, what if we cancel classes and just hold conferences?

We'd buy all that time we spend preparing and running the classes that don't work."

"I'd bet we'd teach better, and we just might be able to teach more students."

"You mean process," we laughed together.

And so we designed a basic composition course without class meetings, a course in which we would respond individually to each student's writing. In this course the content was each student's writing, and the teaching method was the student writing and the teacher reacting in conference. Each student wrote a paper a week and had at least one conference a week.

What We Did

Each student received a question-and-answer sheet, a brief style guide, and "A Writer's Checklist," which is appended to this article. These documents attempted to anticipate the course's organizational problems. They also established the philosophical climate of the course, for as we planned our experiment we found we had to speak our unspoken understanding that every student admitted to the university was a thinking animal who had the potential to say something worth saying in a voice worth hearing.

In brief, our students were told:

#You will write a 500-1000 word paper each week for eleven weeks, and a 1250-2500 word final paper.

#You will pass your paper in before 5:00 PM Thursday. There are no late papers.

#The second time a paper is missing you will be dropped from the course.

#You will find your own subject, aim at your own audience, and select a form which will deliver your message to that audience.

There will be no assignments. You have the responsibility to find and develop your own subject.

#You have the obligation to diagnose your own paper. You will state your principal writing problems at the top of the first page, and evaluate your success in solving them at the bottom of the last page.

#You will receive no grades on individual papers. You will select your own best papers for evaluation at the end of the course.

#You are encouraged to submit major revisions as a substitute for new papers. "A paper that is merely proofread - spelling corrected, grammar untangled - is not a revision. A revision is a complete rethinking, redesigning and rewriting of the paper. In a revision the subject usually expands or retracts and the form itself may change. The student who learns the most from the course may be the student who revises one or two papers during the entire course."

#Conference hours will be posted on each instructor's door. You will sign up for a conference and keep the appointment.

What Our Students Learned

Our students were chosen by computer, and their range of academic reputation was as broad as any group of students in a state university. Some thought of themselves as embryonic Mailers, and the course was the normal route into the university's writing program. But the majority of the students were remedial, and they knew it. They were sent to us by their advisers. They feared writing - they were scientists and agricultural majors, whites and blacks, athletes and band members; they were the bored, the angry, the apprehensive!

Without the crutch of assignments most students began by writing themes, the cosmic or literary papers they thought English teachers wanted. They knew the papers bored them; they were surprised to find, in conference,

that the papers bored us. We drove our students back into themselves, urged them to write about what they knew. We were apprehensive that this would mean juvenile, confessional writing. And it did for some in the beginning. But we were astonished at the range of subject matter. We were teaching lobstermen and waitresses, certified embalmers, a widow with three children, and a counsellor in a camp for dyslexic children. Their range of subject matter was as varied as their backgrounds, experiences, and ambitions. They were minor authorities on their subjects; ~~and~~ they were individuals who deserved individual response. And as our students began to discover they had something to say, they began to hear a distinctive voice, their own, saying it.

As the semester progressed our students began to understand two apparently contradictory concepts. One principle was that the content was more important than the form, that what they said determined how they said it. ~~And~~ if their writing was honest, specific, and informative they would earn readers. At the same time our students learned that they had to have something to say to write. They discovered the other basic concept, that the way to have something to say is to write. They found that the writer usually doesn't know what he has to say until he says it, for writing is an act of thinking, a process of discovery, an exploration.

Our students came to the course burdened by the belief that writing was a mystique, something which was given. If it could be taught it would be done by a magical laying-on of hands. But the more they wrote the more they realized that the ability to write is not a gift from a mysterious muse, but a skill which could be acquired through diligence and practice.

In our conferences we leaned heavily on the stages of

prewriting, writing, and rewriting, as described in A Writer Teaches Writing, which was written by one of the authors of this article and is published by Houghton Mifflin. In some cases the students were assigned this book, for it seemed to help them break the writing process down into steps they could take one at a time.

As our students shared their evaluations of their work with ours they began to realize there is no right and wrong in writing. There is what works and what doesn't work; what communicates and what doesn't communicate. They found that what is appropriate for one paper in one form, aimed at a specific audience, may not be appropriate in another paper. In rewriting their own papers our students discovered that writing, as Valery said, "is never finished, only abandoned." Any piece of writing is never completed, it can always be further discovered, further understood, further improved.

A side benefit of our experimental course was that our students discovered instructors were individuals, each one different, but each capable of entering into the act of understanding, and therefore improving, the paper with the student. The instructor and the student earned each other's respect as they worked together, and this relationship did not diminish the authority of the instructor, for he re-earned his authority each time he read a student's paper and reacted to it honestly.

What We Learned

As so often happens, we learned more than our students. We discovered, first of all, that all the predictors of success in composition - test scores, academic record, social-economic background, maturity - simply did not predict individual performance when we responded to the students individually. Our best students were sometimes our colleagues' worst students, and our colleagues' best students our worst.

But as we taught entirely by conference we discovered there was a greater evil than the faculty's faith in conventional methods of predicting success. As our students started to zoom ahead to our delight and their utter astonishment, we realized how little control we had over the educational environment in our classrooms in the past. Before the teacher enters the room the student from forestry looks around, sees the girl who looks as if she writes circles over her "i's", and decides he is the "D" student he's always been in English, while little Miss A lolls back on her high-school reputation. The pecking order is quickly established. When there is no class meeting, however, the student can not compete with his classmates; he is forced to compete with himself, to attempt to write better each time than he wrote before.

As we taught by conference we began to realize the hands of what Joe Yukica, ~~now~~ football coach at Boston College, calls "over-coaching," could do ~~positive harm~~ what to our students. In the past we taught many of our students already knew, and by teaching it we made them self-conscious; and if we really worked at it they became unable to practice the skills they once possessed. In conference teaching you don't teach a student to organize whose pieces are instinctively well-organized. You confirm his ability and provide him with the confidence he deserves so he will continue to do well, and you save your energy to teach organization to the student who is disorganized.

We found that the conference teacher is rewarded by more surprises than the classroom teacher. The shy girl who never speaks in class has to respond in conference, and soon begins to turn in strong, out-spoken pieces of writing. The botany major finds that his

feeling for nature isn't scorned, and the instructor receives an interview with a meadow. The apparent plodder reveals a sophisticated sense of irony; the vapid blonde the eye of a satirist. The instructor, along with his students, learns there can be no absolute standards, no certain superiority of one subject matter over another or one genre over another. Good writing is good writing.

Our experience in teaching one-on-one reaffirmed our distrust of assignments. The assignment gives the student too much. It does his work for him, or rather, the teacher does his work for him, telling him what to say and how to say it. But the teacher who eliminates assignments has to be prepared for student resentment. It's hard to find a subject, to discover something worth saying, and the student would prefer the teacher to provide the crutch of an assignment. Our students were forced, often it seemed for the first time, to think, to think critically, to find out that the unexamined life is, indeed, not worth living, and the examined life is exciting.

Our students learned they had senses, minds, and voices, and we learned they had been cheated by conscientious teachers in the past whose assignments had made it impossible for the students to experience the writing process from prewriting through rewriting. The assignment, more than any other single thing, had kept our students from learning to write in the past.

Sitting down with our students individually we found that our colleagues' belief that most beginning college students are over-confident about their writing ability. We had the cocky -creative and the kooky-creative, but they were in the minority. Most of our students realized their writing was weak and needed improvement. Once given the opportunity

to write and rewrite, they seized it. We had more students who wrote more than was required than those who wrote less and were dropped.

We also found all our students capable of diagnosing a key writing problem on a paper, and they were therefore capable of suggesting a treatment. We would ask them first what they thought of their paper. When a student answered, "This paper seems all jumbled up. Do you think I should outline and rewrite it?", all we had to do was to confirm the diagnosis and treatment. We did discover, however, that our students were better at spotting a weakness than a strength. Often our most important job in conference was to give the student the confidence he had earned. Our students learned most when they could work from a position of strength.

We learned that conference teaching required a casual-appearing, relaxed, conversational atmosphere; and we also learned it demanded a great deal of energy to be relaxed and yet give concentrated attention to each paper and each student. The experienced classroom teacher can drift along at times the way he rarely can in conference. Conference teaching is tough and disciplined. It isn't easy, and it probably takes a good teacher, by any measure, to be a good teacher in conference. But it is worth the price when you see students developing the skill of writing.

~~And~~ there are, however, tricks to conference teaching, as there are to every form of teaching, which compress the time and energy it takes. When papers are read before conference they should be scanned, since the instructor is simply trying to confirm the student's own diagnosis of his paper. We both prefer to read each paper in advance of the conference, but one of us has experimented with reading short papers

for the first time in conference with the student. It's scary, but it works. And if the instructor can do this he can turn hours of preparation into hours of conferences when he and his students confront their papers, shoulder to shoulder, pen in hand.

The teacher must remember his role and not over-teach. It is not his responsibility to correct a paper line by line, to rewrite it until it is his own writing. It is the student's responsibility to improve the paper and the teacher's responsibility to make a few suggestions which may help the student improve. Some times the instructor may want to edit a sentence, a paragraph, or even several paragraphs in consultation with the student. But ultimately it is the student, not the teacher, who corrects the paper. To learn, the student must rewrite his own paper, not merely accept his teacher's editing.

We found that conferences should be short - no more than fifteen minutes, and frequent. At least once a week. Students today are quite properly concerned with getting their money's worth, but we found our students willing to trade hours of class time for the opportunity to have an individual conference with their instructor, to receive a response that clearly meets their needs and assists them in improving their own writing.

That response is usually much more efficient if it is spoken rather than written. Written comments are rigid, easy to misinterpret. In conference the student and the teacher may each repeat what they have to say in different words using different analogies, until they are sure they understand each other.

And it is possible to teach by conference under the actual conditions at a typical college. In a conventional composition course the teacher usually holds three hours of class meetings, either three

times a week or in one long workshop session. The instructor spends twice that time preparing for the class, and he also has at least an hour of conferences for each hour of class. That's a minimum of twelve hours for each 15-20 student section in a basic composition course. In our experiment we found an instructor could handle thirty students in $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours of 15-minute conferences broken up over two or three days a week. It normally took no more than an hour to scan through the next day's papers to prepare for the conferences. Remember that you know the student as you never do in class, that you are confirming his diagnosis of his own problems, that he is taking one step in the writing process at a time, and that many of his papers are revisions of papers you've gone over before.

We found we could teach as many as a hundred students a week in conference; that means 25 hours of conferences. Even without class meetings, no other conference periods, and little time spent on papers before conferences, that is demanding, exhausting teaching, and we do not recommend it. But it can be done when the demand requires it. If a teacher wants to experiment with conference teaching he should consider a stimulating mix of class-taught courses and conference-taught courses. He will find, of course, that he is able to handle a larger number of students in a traditional content course, but he will also discover he is able to respond to a surprisingly large number of students in conference teaching as part of his regular load. Certainly twenty to thirty students (5 to $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours of conferences) can be a third of a teaching load, thirty to fifty students ($7\frac{1}{2}$ to $12\frac{1}{2}$ hours of conferences) a half teaching load, and fifty to sixty students ($12\frac{1}{2}$ to 15 conference hours) a two-third teaching load.

Conference teaching does take organization, but no more than any other form of effective, responsible teaching. Before he leaves his office the conference teacher lays out the papers to be dealt with in conference the next day in the same way the literature teacher sets out the poetry text and his notes. In a semester or so of conference teaching the instructor becomes experienced in recognizing and responding to familiar writing problems. He should have, for example, a handy file with handouts on the passive voice, paragraph development, or demonstration pages on ways to get into a piece of writing. He will give these to individual students in conference. He should also have a shelf of texts which he may prescribe when the need arises. The texts, of course, should be consistent with the approach to writing followed in the course. The conference teacher's pattern is different from the classroom teacher, but he soon becomes comfortable in responding to a student's problems. He develops a feel for the conference which is as sure as the classroom teacher's sense of the 50-minute hour.

The important thing is that this method is not so much good teaching as good learning. Our experiment worked. Our students' writing improved, and the improvement was documented in file folder after file folder. Of course we didn't win with all students, but regardless of our students' backgrounds almost all of those who made a genuine commitment to their work improved demonstrably. Their grades rose on their written work in other courses. A few even became editors of papers and publications in their own field. Some students ~~even~~ went on to take advanced writing courses. But for most of the students the course gave them a quiet confidence about writing. They did not find an easy way to write, because writing isn't easy, but they understood this and

expressed a familiarity with the process of writing. Semesters later students stopped us to say that when they had to write they knew how to go about it.

And as our students learned we learned. Each week the individual student met with the teacher, and there was no place for the instructor to hide. The student had the responsibility to learn and the faculty member the responsibility to teach. This resulted in a side effect which bothered some of our colleagues. Our grades were generally high, for we dropped our D and F students, the few who would not make a commitment to the course. The ones who remained received individual instruction, and their grades did improve, for their writing improved. ~~got better in our course and in the other courses in which they wrote papers and examinations~~.

Implications For Us All

Once we taught by conferene alone, we never felt the same way in front of a class in another course. The class is always an educational device which trades individuality for efficiency, or at least the appearance of efficiency. Lecturing to a class or even encouraging a class discussion, we are aware as we never were before our experiment, of the diversity of abilities and needs which are suppressed by the artificial averaging of the group.

We might not have been able to conduct this experiment had we not been secure in our reputations as better than average classroom teachers. But even when we returned to our class skills in other courses we realized how much more effective we might be if we could work with our students individually.

Of course there's nothing new about this. Teachers have argued for smaller teaching loads for years, probably for centuries.

Our position is that the teaching loads which exist in most colleges right now make it possible to do some teaching by conference alone. We have become imprisoned by the concept of the class, and we accept the class design of our courses when it may not be necessary, when it may inhibit or even prohibit learning.

In teaching writing it is important that we do not teach our students what they already know, that we do not create a false environment in which we may fool ourselves into thinking that what we are doing is successful. Rather we need to create an environment in which our students run as fast and far as they can. We should coach them so they may run further and faster, not competing against each other, but against themselves, improving, learning.

We must remember that the lecture and the discussion are inefficient methods of communication, no matter how much they satisfy the teacher. What is said well in class can often be said more incisively in handouts, models, exercises, texts, and checklists, such as the second one we have attached here, which can be used in a workshop or by an individual student to evaluate his own paper. ~~And~~ these can be given to the individual student at the moment he sees their relationship to his own page. The conference teacher may wish to explore the use of taped conferences, or an answering service on tape, so that students can tape a question in the morning and play back an answer in the afternoon. One of us has experimented with telephone conferences and found they are extremely valuable. The student is encouraged to call the instructor at home during reasonable hours when the student is experiencing a writing problem. These mini-conferences are efficient and effective. Perhaps the writing teacher should have a daily phone hour the way a pediatrician does.

The good teacher, we believe, is always re-inventing the wheel,

discovering the obvious. We think it is important today to remember that a university isn't 12-acre parking lots, one-acre classrooms, and a contented computer. As we are torn between student anger and student apathy, explosive expansion of our educational institutions and sudden decompression of their resources, growing professional competence deflated by increasing doubts about American education in general and our own teaching in particular, it may be time to make progress by going backward. We tried, and it worked.

We should remember that it was just one hundred years ago when James A. Garfield, ~~then~~ a Congressman destined ~~but eventually~~ to become President, spoke to a Williams College alumni dinner. He advocated raising funds for teachers, not buildings, and then gave his classic definition: "A university is a student on one end of a pine log and Mark Hopkins on the other."

Get back on that log.

A WRITER'S CHECKLIST

I Do I have anything to say? A writer should care. His subject is the itch he has to scratch.

II Do I know what I'm talking about? The writer should have the information which will earn him readers. The writer should provide the documentation which will convince the reader he is an authority on the subject. Many times an effective writer will seek to make himself invisible, to show not tell, to get out of the way of the subject, and to present his material in such a way that the reader will come to the conclusion the writer wants him to reach on his own, without being told about the subject or the writer's conclusions by the writer.

III Is each word necessary, and is each word right? The writer follows E. B. White's teacher's advice. It was his professor at Cornell, Will Strunk, who taught America's most respected stylist that:

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

The writer uses the vocabulary he has under control at the moment of writing. He seeks to use the honest, accurate word to communicate what he has to say.

The writer often feels that he is writing with verbs. He seeks to use the verbs which are simple and active, and yet consistent with what he has to say. He tries to avoid the passive voice (Jim slugged John, rather than, John was slugged by Jim) and the verb "to be," ("I'll wait outside for you," rather than, "I will be going to be waiting outside for you." A writer in editing his own copy will try to avoid unnecessary "woulds," "ings," and "lys."

IV Do my sentences have a pleasing and effective variety? An efficient and attractive writing style usually has sentences which vary in length and form. This variety should break up a monotonous pattern of writing, and it should also reinforce the meaning of what the writer is trying to say. Avoid the topic sentence.

V Do I have a consistent and appropriate tone of voice? The writer hopes to find his voice in his writing. It may help to read a paper aloud to see if the tone is appropriate, the rhythm right, and the emphasis correct.

VI Can the structure of what I have said withstand a reading? A piece of writing must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Each part of the paper must lead the reader to the next part. A good piece of writing will have unity (everything will belong in the paper), coherence (each part will logically lead to the next part), and emphasis (the most important parts will be the most important parts). It may help to write each paragraph on a separate piece of paper and rearrange the paragraphs on a table, bed, wall, or floor until they achieve an effective order. The writer should have a reason for putting each paragraph where it's put.

VII Are the proportions right? The writer rereads and often rewrites his own piece of work to make sure that each part of it is neither over-developed nor under-developed, and to make sure that there is an appropriate balance between the parts of the piece of writing.

VIII Have I been honest? Think back through all the reading you have done and try to figure out why you remember your favorites. The reason will probably be honesty; honest writing is rare, for few people have the toughness, perception, and courage to be honest. But honesty is what writing is all about. The skills of writing should not be skills of deception; not of complication, but of simplicity.

AN EDITOR'S CHECK LIST

Read the copy quickly and easily as a reader and as a human being. Then read carefully and comment constructively, working down from the problems of content to form and, finally, language.

Content

#Does the writer have anything to say?
#Does he say it?
#Is there an audience for what he has to say?
#Does he have an abundance of specific information which will convince the reader the writer has the authority to make his case?
#Does the writer have a point of view or an approach toward the subject which will help the writer control what he has to say?
#Is the writer honest?

Form

#Is the genre the writer has chosen appropriate and effective?
#Does the internal structure, order or logic of the piece stand up to a thoughtful reading?
#Does the beginning inform and entice the reader?
#Does the middle develop the writer's subject, defining his terms and documenting his points?
#Does the end wrap it up?
#Are the dimensions of the piece of the writing in harmony with each other?
#Does the writing unfold at an attractive pace?
#Is there a consistent tone or voice throughout the piece of writing?

Language

#Does each paragraph carry a fully developed burden of meaning?
#Is there a pleasing pattern of paragraphs which reinforce the writer's meaning?
#Does each sentence carry the subject forward?
#Is each sentence as simple and direct as the writer's subject and style allows?
#Is there an effective variety of sentences?
#Are there any unnecessary words?
#Do the words work well together?
#Does the writer lean on verbs and nouns, avoid decorative adverbs and adjectives, and skirt the dangers of too many "lys," "ings," "woulds," the verb "to be," and the passive voice?
#Is each word right - direct, accurate and honest?

Remember the writer is a human being. Your job is neither to impress him with your cleverness or earn his affection with false praise. What the writer needs is an honest, specific reaction with constructive suggestions which are not directives but simply suggestions. Everything you do should support the writer during his own search for his own subject and his own voice.